
PRESENTACIÓN

**SOME REMARKS ON THEMATIC AND INFORMATION STRUCTURE
IN CASUAL CONVERSATION**

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RESUMEN

This study focuses on the interplay between thematic and information structures especially realized in the chat segments of casual conversations. With the aim of determining their contribution to the attainment of coherence in dialogue, predication themes are examined. A corpus of 60 colloquial verbal encounters between university students of 18 to 25 years of age is used as the basis for a qualitative analysis. The theoretical point of departure is the Systemic Functional approach to the clause seen as message, which considers that the choices of Theme/Rheme and Given/New are realized by the addressor with consideration of the addressee and represent decisions made within different dimensions. The results obtained showed that these verbal resources related to the way in which a clause is organized not only interact between themselves but also with perceptive and cognitive means that participants make use of in their communicative activities as social beings. The above mentioned options add to the coherence of a text through their relationship with the purpose of the talk.

Coherence has been looked at from different perspectives, and in diverse types of discourses among which oral verbal encounters have not been an exception. It has already been said that it is not possible to outline or predict the global structure of casual conversation, given the great variability which can be observed in these kinds of texts (Eggins & Slade, 1997). Local coherence, on the other hand, has been dealt with by researchers adhering to different theoretical perspectives, like Conversation Analysis and The Rhetorical Structure Theory (Mann & Thompson, 1988) which analyzes the relationships between segments of discourse irrespective of their length.

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Piwek understands the participation of different factors in the attainment of a coherent text: He considers that:

Coherence is, no doubt, a complex phenomenon likely to require analysis from more than one single perspective (Piwek, 2007: 1).

Mann describes coherence as:

A kind of impression that arises or not in a person who attempts to understand a particular language use. Coherence, he notices, has been attributed to different resources, such as the use of topic shifting devices, the observation of rules or maxims, to social linguistic behaviour. In a likely manner, coherence has been said to be the result of an effort or goal on the part of the participants of being coherent in interactive discourse. An opposing view places coherence on the interpreter's side. Yet a third view considers it an obligation of interaction (Mann, 2002: 1).

Mann refers to coherence as a personal experience related to the reception of language. Thus coherence is, in his opinion, not inherent in a text: it is rather what people find (or do not find) in it. There is no denying that the producer of a text will try to compose it in such a way as it results in a unified whole to those to whom the text is addressed. This view is held by systemic functional linguists for whom the text may exhibit texture while coherence is attributed to a text by those who read it or listen to it. In this respect, the interplay between Thematic Structure and Information structure has important bearings upon the organization and the interpretation of coherence in discourse.

As Halliday and Matthiessen hold, Thematic Structure

[...] gives the clause its character as a message ... some form of organization whereby it fits in with, and contributes to, the flow of discourse. [...] The clause is organized as a message by having a distinct status assigned to its parts.

Theme is a functional label which refers to "the point of departure" of the message, it is that which locates and orients the clause within its context; *Rheme* is the remainder of the message, the part in which the Theme is developed (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004: 64).

The choice of theme functions to organize and carry forward the discourse and it is also an important decision in the construction of coherence.

Themes are classified according to three parameters (Taboada & Lavid, 2003):

- their metafunctional type,
- their semantic type and
- their degree of markedness within the structure of the clause.

According to the first parameter, Themes may be *textual*, *interpersonal* and/or *ideational*; with respect to the second parameter, Themes could represent *Circumstances*, *Participants* or *Processes*; finally Themes can be classified into *marked* and *unmarked*, according to the probability of appearance within the structure of the clause. Following Firbas (1992), the “point of orientation” (rheme) contributes to the communication development in relation to its “communicative dynamism”. Rheme is associated with the sentence perspective.

One interesting characteristic we find in the dialogues under analysis, and which we believe contributes to rendering a text coherent, is the frequent production of the expression “*lo que pasa*” (what happens) which occurs as a focalizing segment that leads the interlocutor to establish hierarchies of meanings and thus experience the coherence in the other’s words with less difficulty. It is a case of syntactic emphasis – a type of attributive construction, called equational (*ecuacional*), (Pinuer, 2005) in which all the elements of the clause are organized into two constitutive clauses. These two clauses are linked by the verb “to be” which shows a relationship of identity. The first clause acting as a Theme contains the vicarious verb “happen” (*pasar*), and all that happens appears in the Rheme.

This recurrent expression is an instance described as a nominalization, and as such, taken as a single element acting as the theme of the message. The following fragment shows one occurrence of the construction under analysis.

1.

La: Tenía la hoja que la llevé a la casa de mi abuela para llamar desde ahí... y se ha traspapelado. ¡No! Si cuando yo empiece a limpiar la caja esta que tengo acá abajo...

Al: Si, yo no me quiero imaginar, ya te dije.

La: **Lo que pasa** es que acá abajo hay dos carpetas de Psico 2, ¡y de Psico 1!

Al: Mmm. [Te, tenés que...]

Ma: [Que son carpetas] que me dio, que me dio Pato .. que obviamente ella no las va a usar nunca más en su vida.

La: I had the sheet of paper that I took to my grandmother’s house to phone from there... And it’s got lost. No, if when I start cleaning this box that I have under here...

Al: Yes, (quite). I do not want to imagine; I’ve already told you.

La: **What happens** is that under here there are two folders of Psycho II and of Psycho I.

Al: Mmm [You’ve got two...]

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Ma: [which are folders] that Pato gave me... that obviously she'll never use them again in her whole life.

In contrast with this typical pattern there is a standing-out or *marked alternative* in which the equational phrase may appear as the second element of a clause, of which only one example was found in the data. It is case of "lo que te iba a decir" (*what I was going to tell you*) in the next segment.

2.

Ari: Eso es **lo que te iba a decir**, me imagino. Sí, acá también a veces hacen Tie, eh... fiestas así de Tierra del Fuego... yo me acuerdo que el... que apenas me vine a estudiar, el primer año habré ido y el segundo, ya después era ir, boluda, y ver a todos los de Río Grande ahí, onda [va a cantar...]

[(Risas)]

Ari: Chau, no los quiero ni ver.

Ari: This is **what I was going to tell you**, I imagine. Here also sometimes they make Tie, eh... parties like this from Tierra del Fuego... I remember that the... that I as soon as I came here to study, the first year, I must have gone, and the second. Then, afterwards, it was going, you silly, and meeting all those from Río Grande, in a way [he is going to sing...]

(laughter)

Ari: Stop it. I don't even want to see them.

Here the usual realization is reversed and the nominalization becomes the Rheme. In both cases, the equational structure forms part of an identifying clause which has a nominalization in it; on the one hand, it specifies what the Theme is; on the other hand, it equates with the Rheme. There is also a component of exclusiveness "this and this alone" carried by this option.

However, this structural analysis does not reflect the complete scope of the meaning of this expression. In the corpus, this structure seems to have another function in relation to the flow of the discourse: it can serve as a signal of new information coming. In fact, by means of using this resource, the speaker may offer guidance to his interlocutor as to how to take and interpret what he will hear next.

THE INFORMATION UNIT: GIVEN + NEW

Halliday and Matthiessen hold that,

[...] the textual component within the grammar is the resource for creating discourse that hangs together with itself and with its context of situation. The

Theme system construes the clause as a message parallel to the system of information which implies the tension between what is already known or predictable and what is new or unpredictable (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004: 89).

Any information unit consists of a given element (although it might be elided) accompanied by a New element. The information is presented by the speaker as recoverable (Given) or not recoverable (New) to the listener. What is treated as non-recoverable may be something that has not been mentioned before, but it may also be something unexpected, whether previously mentioned or not. The meaning is: "pay attention to this, this is new".

As Ellen Prince (1981) notices, the central factor seems to be the construction of an utterance by an addressor taking into consideration the needs of a receiver. That is, information in natural language is packaged in such a way that it projects the speaker's ideas about the mental state of his interlocutor in terms of his assumptions and beliefs; Prince speaks of "assumed familiarity" rather than given information. Chafe (1976) describes givenness in the sense of saliency. For this author, given information represents,

[...] that knowledge which the speaker assumes to be in the consciousness of the addressee at the time of the utterance (Quoted by Prince, 1976: 228).

Finally, givenness may be described with Clark and Havilland (1977) as "shared knowledge": the speaker assumes that the hearer "knows" or can infer a particular thing but he is not necessarily thinking about it. Sperber and Wilson (1986), in their theory about Relevance, hold that the highest degree of coherence will be found in those utterances in which the interpretation process requires less effort on the part of the listener. For them, common ground is not a trustworthy assumption.

Given versus new information is a distinction between, on the one hand, information that is assumed or supplied by the speaker, and on the other, that which is presented for the first time. The distinction between given and new information may affect the structure of clauses and discourses.

Prince (1981: 235) states that new information can be introduced by:

- a "brand-new entity", something not previously mentioned in the discourse, and which is assumed by the speaker to be unknown to the addressee;
- an "unused entity" which is referred to for the first time in the discourse, but assumed to be already a part of the addressee's knowledge;
- an "inferable entities" when the speaker assumes that the hearer can infer or recover them through an association with discourse entities already mentioned

- “Evoked entities” which refer to those already mentioned earlier in the discourse or those that are situationally salient.

As Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) put it, an information unit consists of an obligatory New element plus an optional Given. The New is marked by prominence, and the Given typically precedes the New.

The unmarked relationship between the system of Information and the system of Theme is that the Given be expressed in the Theme, while the New, in the Rheme.

THE THEMATIC AND INFORMATION INTERPLAY

We have found that the first part of the non-marked thematic equational “what happens”, *lo que pasa*, serves as the signal of new information that is coming; it acts as a kind of metadiscoursal expression which tells the addressee that he should prepare himself to hear and process the change of topic or of one aspect of the on-going topic.

We have found that this structure anticipates new information related to what has just been said, in Prince's terms, “inferable entities”: the speaker assumes that the hearer can make an inference, as in case 3, where “mi mamá me llevó a arreglar y no sé cuántas tapitas [...]” *my mother took them to be mended, and I do not know how many layers* is metonymically related with shoes and sandals, just mentioned before.

3.

H1: Pará, que el otro día me saco las sandalias, las que uso para salir, que tienen taco cómodo, no sólo que se le había salido, viste el... el taquito, el finito...

H2: La chapita, sí

H1: ¡Un cacho de taco... voló!

H2: Y... porque se te salió mucho, a mí también me pasó.

H1: **Lo que pasa** es que mi mamá me llevó a arreglar y no sé cuántas tapitas le puso a los zapatos.

H: Stop, some days ago I took off my sandals, those I wear to go out, that have comfortable heels. Not only had the thin heel come off,

B: The thin layer, yes.

H: A piece of heel flew off.

B: And because a lot came off, it happened to me too.

H: **What happens** is that my mother took them to be mended, and I do not know how many layers she had put on the shoes.

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In 4, with the same equational structure, the speaker introduces an unused entity; as said before, it is an entity referred to for the first time in the discourse, but assumed to be already a part of the addressee's knowledge. In fact, these two speakers live in the same neighbourhood, near the road junction, which is newly mentioned in the discourse, but information shared by the two participants.

4.

B: pero son caras al p... las scooters, yo que él me compro una buena, una 125 que no es la moto, no va, aparte ir rápido ir lento hoy en día lo decidís vos

A: sí, **lo que pasa** es que no podés ir por el distribuidor a 60 porque te llevan puesto

B: But they are unnecessarily (nasty word) extensive... the scooters. If I was him, I would buy a good one, a 125, which is not the scooter, apart from that, to go quickly or slowly today, you decide.

A: Yes, **what happens** is that you can't go through the road junction at 60 because they run you over.

New information can be introduced by a "brand-new entity" , a referent that has not been mentioned previously in the discourse, and is assumed by the speaker to be unknown to the addressee, as 5 shows:

5.

Mel: Encima es sentarte porque sabés que te tenés que sentar. [XXX] Mentira, porque no lo hago nunca así que [(risas)]

Ag: [no se].

Mel: **pero lo que pasa** es que por ahí el otro día agarré el *Vince* y me puse a hacer. ¿Viste que no hay que entregarlo al final?

Ag: Sí.

Mel: On top of that, it is sitting because you know you have to sit. [XXX] lies, because I never do it, so (laughter).

Ag: I do not know.

Mel: **But what happens** is that sometimes, the other day I took the *Vince* and I started to d . Have you seen that it's not to be handed in in the end?

Ag: Yes.

The fact that the speaker had started "to do the *Vince*" was unknown by her interlocutor.

In 6, the new information is introduced by the equational structure by means of an "evoked entity" which has already been mentioned in the discourse:

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6.

Ro: ... y saber de historia, saber... o sea, no es mala la [política.]

Ya: [¡No!]

Ro: **Lo que pasa** es que ¡acá está bastardeada! En Argen[tina.]

Ya: [Sí.]

...

Ro: ¿Vos qué opinás?

Ya: Sí...

Ro: ¡Bahh! Esto ya lo hemos hablado.

Ya: Sí. **Lo que pasa** es que acá es terrible, se confunden intereses, se mezcla todo... [y yo...]

Ro: and to know about history, to know... I mean... politics is not bad.]

Ya: [No]

Ro: **What happens** is, that here it is downgraded, in Argentina.

Ya: Yes

...

Ro: What do you think?

Ya: Yes...

Ro: Well, that we've already discussed.

Ya: Yes. **What happens** is that here it is terrible, interests are confused, everything mixes.

In the first occurrence, the thematic equational functions as a contrastive structure that assures coherence avoiding logical inconsistency. We could paraphrase as "politics is not bad but here it is downgraded" (no es mala la política pero acá está bastardeada). Then, Yanina re-uses the same structure not only to agree with Rocío but to specify her opinion as well.

In the following excerpt, we can see that Laura uses this thematic equational structure to introduce an "evoked entity" situationally salient: they are talking about the room:

7.

La: ¡Viste el agujero que le hizo!

Al: Pero, ¿por qué tanto?! ¡Porque esto no, no es yeso, es material!

La: ¡No! **Pero lo que [pasa...]**

Al: [Viste,] que quedara un coso de yeso y, bueno, por ahí se puede caer, pero... Vas a tener que hacerte... ¿Por qué no ponés los, el porta retrato ahí? Para taparlo.

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La: **Lo que estoy pensando** es poner la cama... de este costado... y los estantes en aquella pared. Pero mi miedo es lo que [te conté de los, del...]

Al: [(Carraspea)] El caño... del baño.

La: Los caños del baño.

La: Have you seen the hole he made?

Al: But why so much? Because this doesn't, it's not plaster. It's cement.

La: No! But **what happens**

Al: You see, a portion of plaster remained, and, well, it may fall, but... You'll have to ... Why don't you put the, the picture there ... To cover it.

La: **What I'm thinking of**, is putting the bed there on this side,,, and the shelves on that wall. But my fear is what [I told you about the ...]

Al: [(Coughs)] The pipe ... in the bathroom.

La: The pipes of the bathroom.

Additionally, in case 7, as well as in 8, 9 and 10 (among others we have found), the thematic equational structure introduces a relation of opposition signalled by an initial "pero", *but*. As we can see, "lo que pasa" is also occasionally preceded by negation.

8.

Ge: Yo tengo que rendir Botánica.

Jo: ¿Difícil?

Ge: No, **lo que pasa** es que hay algunos problemas ahí con los profesores, qué se yo, no me llevo muy bien.

Jo: ¡Ahh, sí! ¿Sos de los revoltosos?

Ge: No, no. Qué se yo.

Jo: Ahh. Hay que estudiar.

Ge: I have to sit for Botany.

Jo: Difficult?

Ge: No. **What happens** is that that there are some problems there with the teachers, I don't know, I don't get along very well with them

Jo: Ah! You're of the messy kind

Ge: No, no. I don't know.

Jo: Ahh! Studying is necessary.

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9.

Jo: Está bueno, sí, está bueno. **Lo que pasa** es que yo no me dediqué mucho y ahora estoy haciendo todo a las corridas. Tengo que presentar los, los planos en, ahora en feb[rero...]

Jo: That's good, yes, it's good. **What happens** is that I didn't give it much time and now I'm doing everything in a hurry. I've got to submit the, the plans in, now in Februa[ry]

10.

La: Bueno, o sea, ¿qué? Se van a alquilar una casa...

Ro: Por lo visto.

La: **Lo que pasa** es que están re caros los alquileres.

La: Well, I mean. What? Are they going to rent a house?

Ro: I think so.

La: **What happens** is that rents are very high.

It is commonly observed that this thematic equational structure is co-constructed by the participants to an interaction. In the following fragment, Belén begins with the thematic equational and Roman reinitiates the structure: he first repeats the theme and then adds the Rheme, thus completing the utterance.

11.

Ro: Hay que ir al comedor. Un peso, es una ganga. Terrible.

La: **Lo que pasa** que... bueno.

Ro: **Lo que pasa** es que te.. te tienen que coincidir los horarios.

Ro: We must go to the cafeteria. One peso, is very cheap. Incredible.

La: **What happens** is that... well

Ro: **What happens** is that ... timetables don't have to overlap.

Finally, fragment 12 shows a slightly different occurrence in which the utterance is really co-constructed. Ariela initiates with a interpersonal theme and uses the thematic equational and Juliana introduces the Rheme without repeating the theme. This case demonstrates once more how the flow of discourse and coherence are really co-constructed:

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12.

Ari: No, no... [no nos quieren porque somos de inglés]

[(Risas)]

Ju: ¿Ah, sí? ¿Discriminación?

Ari: Sí, **lo que pasa** es que, claro...

Ju: Nosotros somos tan pocos que no sí, si nos discriminan se quedan sin nadie (entre risas).

Ari: No, no... [they don't like us because we come from the English Department]

(Laughter)

Ju: Really? Discrimination?

Ari: Yes, **what happens** is that, sure...

Ju: We are so few that no, yes, if they discriminate us they will be left alone (laughing)

CONCLUSIONS

We have looked at a particular way of helping the construction, or co-construction of coherence in discourse. It consists of the resource of placing a kind of anticipatory element in thematic position that can direct the attention of listeners towards parts of the text which constitute, as a whole, the rheme of a move and are to be taken as new in the information structure system. If this expression was not used, at least part of the second clause would act as theme and in neutral cases as given, thus producing a different pragmatic effect, perhaps communicatively speaking, less effective. This is no doubt a very small and partial analysis of an aspect of coherence in casual conversations. However, we believe that a more extensive and comprehensive study of this type of strategy would contribute to the identification of the characteristics of more effective communication in our language.

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